

Sound and Experience

– Audio Culture and Acoustemology

Open mini conference

On May 26th 2008

Venue: Institute of Aesthetic Studies

Langelandsgade 139, 1584/124, 8000 Aarhus

Conference programme

Monday 26th May

- 10.00 Welcome
- 10.10 Christoph Cox: *Modernity and the Virtual Field of Sound*
- 11.30 Ola Stockfelt: *Arts of Listening – histories, contexts, functions*
- 13.15 Arnt Maasø: *Designing Media – Designing Sound Communities on the Internet*
- 14.45 Iben Have: *Knowing and feeling reality through sound and music*
- 15.15 Panel discussion – questions from the audience

Sound is a powerful part of reality for most people and an important topic for a number of scholarly disciplines. Currently, researchers from sociology, economics, anthropology, media studies, musicology, architecture and aesthetic studies are thus focusing on concepts like *soundscape* (Schafer 1977; 'environments of sound') and *auditive culture* to explore such diverse phenomena as sound pollution, tinnitus, use of sound in (mobile) media, product development, sales situations, recreation, fitness, torture, warfare, art and music.

This tendency is a major current within different theoretical movements in which reality is investigated as a 'world of sound' and experienced as an 'experience through sound'. It is urgently necessary to develop an adequate and coherent *acoustemology* that can qualify a fundamental understanding of sound and sound practices. Following the music ethnologist Steven Feld, *acoustemology* is a theory of the epistemological potential of sound/audibility/the acoustic, of what and how we experience through sound, through listening and other auditive practices – currently and historically, collectively and with respect to the individual human being, as well as in constant interaction with our other senses.

The dominant visual paradigm primarily views meaning/signification as supported by signs. Sound's potential for meaning/signification cannot, however, be understood as supported by signs and fixed in a system that can be perceived outside the particular situation. Likewise, research in acoustics – sound studied as a physical phenomenon – has aimed at objectifying sound with a generalized perspective, while new research initiatives outlined above are characterized by sound being investigated in situations in which the listening subject is always already inscribed.

Organizers: *Forskningsgruppen for Akustemologi* (Research Group of Acoustemology), IÆF, University of Aarhus
This conference is within the research field of the University of Aarhus Videnssamfundet (Knowledge Society)

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Abstracts

Christoph Cox: *Modernity and the Virtual Field of Sound*

In this talk, I offer an ontology of sound (that is, an account of its being or nature) and argue that 20th century technologies of recording and transmission have played a key role in calling attention to this ontology. Drawing on the work of media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler, I show that recording technologies shifted attention from the eye to the ear and expanded the domain of the audible to encompass *noise*, what Kittler calls the "auditory real." Challenging our ordinary and scientific conceptions of noise, I argue that noise names the primary level of sound and helps us to conceive of sound as a continuous, anonymous flux to which human expressions contribute but which precedes and exceeds these expressions. This shift from signal to noise corresponds with the shift, in 20th century aesthetics, from music to sound art. The richest works of sound art, I suggest, are unique among audible phenomena in that they help to disclose the virtual dimension of sound and its process of actualization. As such, they not only explore particular sonic forms and spaces but offer openings onto the domain of sound as such.

Ola Stockfelt: *Arts of Listening - histories, contexts, functions*

In the historical development of new music practices throughout history, the development of new practices of performative listening have always been a crucial part, although rarely explicitly recognised as such. Making distinctions about what is to be regarded as related to sound, even musical sounds, and what is to be related to other sensory modalities, has always been a central part of this development. This discussion is today, as ever before, brought into focus by development of new media and new arenas for artistic expression and communication.

My aim is to discuss a few interrelated fields, i.e. film, computer games and artistic practical based research, in which a historical perspective on the art of performative listening competence can be crucial for identifying relevant areas of competence.

Arnt Maasø: *Designing Sound in Media: Creating 'Presence' in the Experience of Sound and Sound Culture*

Creating a feeling or experience of *presence* is a central trait of sound design in a variety of genres and media. This ranges from the use of diegetic sounds in fiction film via the role of the studio audience in sitcoms to the design of the voice in popular music. In this talk I discuss such sound design in relation to phenomenological and perceptual aspects of sound and listening by using a variety of examples from sound design in different media and previous research. The experience of aural presence is furthermore discussed in relation to more recent changes in listening habits and sound design, such as the experience of iPod-listening and the design of music services on social network sites such as Facebook and

last.fm. Compared to the 'old' media of radio, film and television, these new listening habits and uses of mediated sound may change the way we experience mediated sounds. Both in relation to other sounds, the way we experience the presence of the 'mediated absent', and the presence and absence of others in the listening situation.

Iben Have: *Knowing and feeling reality through sound and music*

The presentation will be based on my research in music and sound as aesthetic and communicative devices in factual television, and especially my recent interest in ethical perspectives concerning the question of manipulation. This will give rise to broader acoustemological questions about how reality, knowledge and emotions are realised, mediated and experienced through sound and music. My purpose is not to answer these questions but to qualify them for the panel discussion that follows.